

Literature (Fiction)

EXAMPLE SOURCE: Morris Gleitzman, *Once* (Penguin, 2005)

Key Considerations

- ❖ We would understand this work as testimony only in the sense described under the heading “Secondary Witnesses” above; that is, a creative writer has taken the first-person accounts of survivors and used them to create a new artistic form. Students need to be made continuously aware that they are engaging with fiction and that the “authenticity” of the text relates to its ability to convey a story that “could be” true, not one that “is” true. This also represents an opportunity to engage students with the question of *why* we might study fiction (when “real life” stories are available).
- ❖ The text itself works with the idea of telling stories as a way to get through difficult situations and to process grief and loss. In this way, it reflects on its own status as a work of the imagination, but also on the value of fiction: it is notable though that Felix in the end sacrifices his stories, but keeps the letters (the testimonies?) of his parents.
- ❖ The book is written from the perspective of one who does not know what is going on, but gradually comes to learn over the course of the text. This in itself may feel unrealistic (also to the students who will likely have more knowledge than Felix on approaching the book); however, it can provide useful opportunities to check understanding and address misconceptions. Along the lines:

“What does Felix think is going on in this scene?” “What is really going on?”

- ❖ Teachers will need to consider if they are going to work with the whole text or an extract of it. Working with an extract is less time-intensive and can allow real engagement with a key scene; however, it will need some careful thought in terms of contextualisation.

Starting Point

We would recommend starting with the author’s biography. This will set up expectations *before* the students engage with the text and ensure that they are aware that the author did not have the experiences that he describes, where he got the idea for the work from, and that they are dealing with a fiction. A good starting place is the “*Dear Reader...*” letter included at the end of the penguin edition. This can also be found on the Morris Gleitzman website: <https://www.morrisgleitzman.com/once.htm>. You might particularly explore with students the statement: “This story is my imagination trying to grasp the unimaginable.” What role can the imagination play in working through difficult histories?

You might also take the opportunity at this point to look at some of the first-person testimonies listed on Gleitzman’s website and which he cites as inspiration for the book. This activity might however be better as a follow-up in order to avoid confusion between these accounts and the fiction.

Source Engagement

The engagement here will depend on the subject area and the aims for the session. This text lends itself beautifully to being taught as a work of English literature that addresses such themes as tolerance, human rights, morality, abuse of power, and loss and grief. Penguin provides some good open-access resources: https://www.penguin.com.au/content/resources/TR_Once.pdf

Nonetheless, we would not recommend glossing over the context of Felix's story, that is, the historical setting of this work of fiction. This means that in engaging with the text, teachers should initially locate those themes within the historical context and ensure that student misconceptions about that history are addressed. As indicated above, the naivety of the protagonist can create opportunities for discussion around such misconceptions.

Further engagement with the context could take the form of student research into the "real-life" biographies of children who experienced Nazi persecution and/or were murdered during the Holocaust. The Museum of Tolerance has a webpage dedicated to children's stories: <http://www.museumoftolerance.com/education/teacher-resources/holocaust-resources/children-of-the-holocaust/> and the BBC combines animation with first-person accounts <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01zx5g7/clips> (**see also above under Video Testimonies**). One suggestion for a follow-on activity is to ask students to write the next chapter of Felix's story, drawing on the knowledge gained from these biographies: students thereby engage in their own form of creative secondary witnessing.